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Coachella Valley Task Force Targets Golf Water Conservation

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A group of golf course managers and water district officials have formed the Coachella Valley Golf Industry Water Conservation Task Force, to focus on reducing the water footprint of the Southern California area's 124 golf courses. In Poway, Calif., city council approved a conditional use permit to allow Maderas Golf Club to start pumping ground water from its wells after being forced to stop in 2011.

Representatives of golf courses announced plans on November 19 to create a task force focused on reducing the water footprint of the Coachella Valley's 124 golf courses, the Palm Springs (Calif.) *Desert Sun* reported.

The task force will involve managers of golf courses as well as officials of the Coachella Valley Water District, said Craig Kessler, director of governmental affairs for the Southern California Golf Association.

Managers of golf courses are concerned about water, Kessler said, and see a need to "step up to the plate as an industry and figure out how to do business in a way that uses less water, uses it more efficiently."

The Coachella Valley Golf Industry Water Conservation Task Force will mirror similar initiatives in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas, the *Desert Sun* reported.

The group took the step following a series of articles in which *The Desert Sun* documented significant long-term declines in groundwater levels. Kessler said the articles "lit a little fire under us" in deciding to establish a more formal venue for dialogue about water conservation. The group touted past efforts to improve water efficiency through state-of-the-art irrigation techniques, the *Desert Sun* reported.

Officials at the Coachella Valley Water District have also recently pledged to accelerate efforts to connect more golf courses to pipes carrying recycled water and Colorado River water. A total of 22 golf courses in the Coachella Valley now use a mix of treated sewage and Colorado River water, while 28 other courses receive water directly from the river through a canal, the *Desert Sun* reported.

Most of the area's golf courses still rely on groundwater from wells, and those large withdrawals from the aquifer have contributed to declines in water levels. Water agencies' records for 346 wells determined that the average measurements of water levels in the wells went from about 104 feet below ground in 1970 to 159 feet below ground this year, reflecting an average decline of 55 feet, the *Desert Sun* reported.

The Coachella Valley Water District, the valley's largest water agency, confirmed it is forming the

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task force together with golf representatives, and said details are being worked out, the *Desert Sun* reported.

"I see a lot of opportunity there, and we definitely support that," John Powell Jr., President of the agency's Board, said after the announcement.

The goals will include looking at ways of bringing recycled water and Colorado River water to more courses, as well as establishing water budgets for each course with an eye to meeting a state requirement that water districts reduce water use 20 percent by 2020, Kessler said, calling it an effort to plan ahead, and said it also brings "a sense of peer pressure."

Several golf course managers expressed interest in finding additional ways to conserve water, while also watching their financial ledgers. Some pointed out that removing turf can be costly, and that in other areas such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, there are programs that partially reimburse courses for such costs, the *Desert Sun* reported.

Many courses in the Coachella Valley have expanses of grass covering 100 acres or more. In Arizona and Nevada, in contrast, golf courses have for years been designed with less turf and more desert landscaping in response to state and local rules, the *Desert Sun* reported.

C&RB will closely examine the club industry's growing role in water management in its two-part series "Fluid Situation," which will appear in the December 2013 and February 2014 issues. Part one will provide a comprehensive look at the current water management situation and how it is likely to evolve in the future.

In Poway, Calif., Maderas Golf Club will be allowed to once again start pumping ground water from its wells after modifications to a conditional use permit were approved by city council, allowing the course to resume the pumping it was forced to stop in 2011, the San Diego *Union-Tribune* reported.

For the past 27 months the course has been forbidden to use its wells for irrigation because of concerns that water levels of neighboring wells, primarily in the Old Coach Estates area, were getting too low, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

In preparation for Tuesday's hearing, the owners of the golf club, Sunroad Enterprises, prepared an extensive report stating that the water used by the golf course did not come from the same aquifer as its neighbors and that resuming pumping would not hurt surrounding areas, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

A different study commissioned by northern Poway residents reached a different conclusion stating that there was a connection. And a third independent study, requested by the city and paid for by Sunroad, backed the first Maderas report, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

During a four-hour hearing attended by close to 200 people, many speakers questioned the validity of the Maderas studies and said if there is a danger of depleting water supplies for homeowners then the city should not take the risk. Many accused Maderas of over-pumping for years, causing the permanent depletion of the water supply, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

"There are many of us back there who have only well water," said homeowner Tom Carter. "I lost my home once in the Witch Creek fire. If I run out of water obviously I lose my home again. I would respectfully request that you consider if there is any risk at all of connectivity that you consider the welfare of your citizens above the bottom line of a golf course."

Sunroad has said it could save \$300,000 to \$500,000 annually if allowed to pump, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

Other speakers urged the council to allow the pumps to be turned back on. They said their home values are directly linked to the health of the course, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

City engineers recommended that Maderas be allowed to turn the pumps back on but with several restrictions. Instead of the 280 acre feet (91.2 million gallons) Sunroad originally wanted to pump, the city said only 173 acre feet (56.4 million gallons) should be allowed. Extensive testing would also be required, and should neighboring wells start to suffer, the pumping could be stopped again, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

The main issue for the council was whether it had been scientifically proven that there is no connection between the water beneath Maderas and the water below the nearby houses and beneath the Blue Sky Ecological Reserve to the southeast, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

Mayor Don Higginson and Councilmen John Mullin and Jim Cunningham said they were convinced by the reports that denying Maderas would not help the Old Coach Estates residents because

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studies showed their wells continued to suffer even after Maderas stopped pumping two years ago. Higginson and Mullin said the lack of rain the past few years likely had far more to do with the homeowner's problems, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

"It's pretty straight forward for me," Higginson said. "There is no hydraulic connection."

Councilmen Dave Grosch and Steve Vaus felt differently, arguing that the groundwater supply beneath northern Poway must be connected in some way, the *Union-Tribune* reported.

"For me, it stretches credulity to say with absolute 100 percent certainty that there is no hydraulic connection," Vaus said. "And without that absolute 100 percent certainty I'm not willing to risk the well-being of the residents and, more importantly to me, the well-being of Blue Sky."

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